

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY / MIDDLE EAST UPDATE
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1. [U.S.-Russian Arms Reduction Deal Expected "Soon" \(03-18-2010\)](#)

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — U.S. and Russian negotiators in Geneva are reporting “substantial progress” on a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) that would reduce the number of nuclear warheads deployed in both countries by about one-quarter, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says, predicting a final agreement will be reached “soon.”

Speaking with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow March 18, Clinton said pending a final agreement, the United States and Russia are beginning discussions on where and when it will be signed by President Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

“We don’t want to get ahead of ourselves,” the secretary said. “First, our negotiators have to sign on the dotted line, so to speak, that they have completed the negotiations. And we’re looking forward to getting that word soon, and then we will move on to setting a time and a place for this very important event.”

Lavrov told reporters, “We have every reason to believe we are now at the finish line.”

The START pact would replace a previous version that expired at the end of 2009. White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said March 18 that the Obama administration wants to see a deal “that moves forward the president’s goal of nuclear security and reducing the amount of nuclear weapons in our world,” while also advancing U.S. national security interests.

“I think it is safe to say that the president has been more personally involved with these negotiations than you’ve probably seen in 20 or 25 years,” Gibbs said. The president has spent “an awful lot of his own time working directly with Mr. Medvedev to ensure that we make the progress that we need.”

Clinton and Lavrov also discussed the [nuclear security summit](#) that will be held in Washington April 12–13.

“It especially is important for the United States and Russia, who bear the responsibility, to continue the way forward on nonproliferation and to work as partners in the global effort to secure fissile materials and counter the threat of nuclear terrorism,” Clinton said, citing the summit as a further example of U.S.-Russian cooperation.

However, the secretary described Russian plans to start the reactor it is building for Iran’s nuclear power plant later in 2010 as “premature,” and urged Russia and others in the international community instead to send “an unequivocal message” to Iran expressing [collective concern](#) over its nuclear activities.

While Iran has the right to peaceful and civil nuclear power, “Iran is not living up to its international obligations,” she said, and needs to hear a clear message that “its pursuit of nuclear weapons poses a direct threat both to regional and global security.”

The State Department’s acting deputy spokesman, Gordon Duguid, said March 18 that any civil nuclear facility in Iran must be under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). “That is no different from any other nuclear power plant in countries that subscribe to the internationally accepted international regime,” he said.

However, Iran is in violation of its IAEA agreement, he continued. “We do not think that moving forward on a business-as-usual basis with Iran is something that we should be doing,” Duguid said, and the United States plans further discussions with Russia on the Bushehr reactor.

2. Secretary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (03-18-2010) **Discuss U.S.-Russia relations, Middle East and Iran’s nuclear program**

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov
March 18, 2010, Moscow, Russia

FOREIGN MINISTER LAVROV: (In Russian.)

SECRETARY CLINTON: Thank you very much, Sergey. Thank you for hosting me and my delegation today in Moscow and thanks to the Russian Government for hosting the Quartet meeting that we will be attending.

Since our first meeting in Geneva, a little more than a year ago, Minister Lavrov and I, along with our respective governments under the leadership of both President Medvedev and President Obama, have worked toward a new beginning in the relationship between the United States and Russia. We believe that this reset of the relationship has led to much greater cooperation, coordination, and a constructive ongoing consultation on numerous issues that are important to our bilateral relationship and to the global issues that we both are facing.

I think it's critical that Minister Lavrov is hosting the Middle East Quartet. When we begin our meetings with Quartet members this evening, we'll have the chance to explore in depth the way forward in the Middle East, but these talks are yet another reminder that the United States and Russia, together, face global challenges, and that there are many people not only in Russia and the United States, but, literally, throughout the world who depend upon the ability of the U.S. and Russia to work together.

We discussed the upcoming nuclear security summit. Fifty heads of state, including President Medvedev, will be in Washington. And it especially is important for the United States and Russia, who bear the responsibility, to continue the way forward on nonproliferation and to work as partners in the global effort to secure fissile materials and counter the threat of nuclear terrorism. So this is another initiative that both President Obama, who suggested it, and President Medvedev, who embraced it, can see the cooperation between us. We are making substantial progress on the new START treaty; that's the word from our negotiators in Geneva. And the results from the latest negotiating rounds lead us to believe we will be reaching a final agreement soon.

We discussed at length Iran's nuclear program, which remains an issue of grave concern for the international community. We are still committed, as we have been, to a diplomatic solution, but there must be a solution. Iran is not living up to its international obligations and, therefore, we're working together with our other partners in the P-5+1 to bring together a very clear international consensus in the Security Council that gives Iran the message it needs to hear that its behavior does have consequences and that its pursuit of nuclear weapons poses a direct threat both to regional and global security.

I thanked Sergey for the cooperation between the United States and Russia with respect to Afghanistan. The transit agreement that our two presidents announced has resulted in troops and material now moving across Russia in support of coalition operations in Afghanistan. As of this week, 111 flights have ferried more than 15,000 soldiers. And we have also increased our cooperation and launched a joint exercise to share financial intelligence related to the flow of narcotics into Russia, an issue that is very important to the Russian people, and that we have pledged to work with the Russian Government to address.

We are also looking for ways to increase our cooperation on disaster response. The devastating earthquake in Haiti was a clear indication of why we need to be working more closely together. Russian emergency relief teams were among the very first on the ground in Haiti after that disaster. This is a particular concern of Minister Lavrov's, and I believe it's another area where we should deepen and broaden our working together.

The Bilateral Commission that our two presidents established is working well, and we're pleased by the results of the efforts of the working groups. This goes far beyond traditional foreign issues. We are exploring new opportunities for collaboration in the fields of energy efficiency and nanotechnology. A United States delegation made up of executives from the information technology companies recently visited Russia to explore joint private sector-led initiatives in education, e-government, and other fields. We're increasing partnerships between Russian and

American universities. And there are growing interactions between American and Russian people, including an upcoming sports exchange for young people using basketball as the means of communications.

Now, there are differences in our relationship. We know that. We've raised them and we have had very frank conversations about them. But they are raised within the context of an overall approach that looks for ways to narrow the areas of difference and disagreement, that looks to enhance the cooperation and partnership between our two countries that we are building.

So let me conclude by saying that we have made real strides in the relationship over the past year, but we still have a lot to do. And many of the challenges facing the world today can only be addressed through greater cooperation between Russia and the United States. That's the commitment of our two presidents. That's the commitment that Sergey and I have made over and over again. And we look forward to continuing to work together in the months ahead.

MODERATOR: (In Russian.)

QUESTION: (In Russian.)

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, we have a saying in the United States – “Don't count your chickens before they hatch.” And that means that we are beginning our discussions about where and when our two presidents will sign the START agreement. But we don't want to get ahead of ourselves. First, our negotiators have to sign on the dotted line, so to speak, that they have completed the negotiations. And we're looking forward to getting that word soon and then we will move on to setting a time and a place for this very important event.

MODERATOR: (In Russian.)

QUESTION: Good evening. Bob Burns from Associated Press. Madam Secretary, the first part of my question is premised on an assumption that you have not spoken to Prime Minister Netanyahu today. Would that be correct?

SECRETARY CLINTON: And what's the second part of your question? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: It depends on what your answer is.

SECRETARY CLINTON: We are engaged in ongoing conversations between our two governments. And when there is something to announce, Bob, you'll be the first to hear.

QUESTION: I was going to follow up by saying that it's now been about a week, nearly a week since you spoke to him and expressed your unhappiness with what happened when Vice President Biden was there. And you're now here to speak to your Quartet colleagues this evening and tomorrow, and I'm wondering if you could tell us what you are able to tell your partners about what Israel needs to do and what the U.S. next steps will be, including George Mitchell's plans. Thank you.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, certainly, we intend to have a very broad-ranging discussion with our Quartet partners. Our goals remain the same. It is to re-launch negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians on a path that will lead to a two-state solution. Nothing has happened that in any way affects our commitment to pursuing that. Senator Mitchell arrived here in Moscow just a

few hours ago to join the Quartet meeting. And as we have seen not only over this past year, but over years past, there are some challenges along the way. We meet them as they come.

And we continue to move forward because we believe it is in the best interests of both the Palestinian and the Israeli people for the Palestinians to have a state of their own that fulfills their aspirations, and for the Israelis to have the security that they deserve to have within their own state. It is also within the regional and global best interests to pursue this, and that's what we intend to do.

MODERATOR: (In Russian.)

QUESTION: (In Russian.)

FOREIGN MINISTER LAVROV: (In Russian.)

SECRETARY CLINTON: We are very committed to working with Russia, other countries, and international organizations like the United Nations to stop the flow of illicit drugs from Afghanistan, along with the criminal activity that accompanies it, particularly the narco-traffickers and the drug cartels. We have made that commitment of cooperation to Russia and we intend to work closely with them. And as Sergey said, we have some new mechanisms that we are developing and new ways of cooperating between our two countries that we hope will even add to our efforts and limit the amount of illicit drugs that gets out of Afghanistan and gets into any country, including Russia.

MODERATOR: (In Russian.)

QUESTION: Thank you. Secretary Clinton, just to make sure I understood correctly, so you have spoken to Prime Minister Netanyahu?

SECRETARY CLINTON: When I have something to report, I will report it to you too, Mary Beth.

QUESTION: Okay. On Iran, Minister Lavrov, clearly, Russia has a certain amount of influence with the Chinese. And I'm wondering what message you're giving the Chinese about how urgent it is to have a new round of sanctions on Iran. And a second question: What type of sanctions do you think are appropriate? Would you consider economic sanctions, for example, on, you know, insurance and banking and so on?

And Secretary Clinton, in a related question, the Russians announced today that they will start up the Bushehr – their nuclear reactor, Bushehr, this summer. Are you concerned about the signal that sends? Thank you.

FOREIGN MINISTER LAVROV: (In Russian.)

SECRETARY CLINTON: With respect to your question to me, that is something that we will be discussing not only with Russia, but with our other partners. But we have consistently said that Iran is entitled to civil nuclear power. It is a nuclear weapons program that it is not entitled to. And if it reassures the world, or if its behavior is changed because of international sanctions, then they can pursue peaceful, civil nuclear power. In the absence of those reassurances, we think it would be premature to go forward with any project at this time, because we want to send an unequivocal message to the Iranians.

FOREIGN MINISTER LAVROV: (In Russian.)

MODERATOR: (In Russian.)

3. Clinton to Attend Middle East Quartet Meeting in Moscow (03-17-2010)

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton travels to Moscow for talks on Middle East peace and on a proposed U.S.-Russian strategic arms treaty.

Beginning March 18, the secretary and Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell will participate in a meeting of the Quartet for Middle East Peace in Moscow. The Quartet, which includes the European Union, United Nations, Russia and the United States, was formed in 2002 in Spain to assist in mediating an end to escalating violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Moscow meeting is scheduled to conclude March 19.

Clinton and Mitchell will be joined by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, European Union High Representative Catherine Ashton and Quartet Special Representative Tony Blair, the former British prime minister. In addition to the Quartet meeting, Clinton is scheduled to meet with Lavrov separately on arms control negotiations, nuclear nonproliferation, counterterrorism, regional security issues and the Bilateral Presidential Commission.

Clinton said in a recent interview that the United States remains committed to the resumption of negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. Talks were stalled until Mitchell was successful recently in getting the two sides to agree to relaunch [indirect peace talks](#).

“We are very committed to achieving the two-state outcome that is the goal,” Clinton said to reporters. “We’ll see what the next days hold.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scheduled to be in Washington the week of March 22 to attend the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee meeting, and is expected to speak with the secretary during that visit, State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said, but it will depend on how schedules can be arranged.

Crowley said the United States is committed to the peace process because of U.S. national security interests, and the interests of the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Without indirect talks that lead to negotiations that lead to a settlement, “there is no prospect of ending this conflict,” Crowley said at a recent State Department daily press briefing.

START TALKS

As part of the trip, Clinton will meet with Lavrov to discuss the [current negotiations](#) for a successor to the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, also known as START I, the State Department said in an announcement.

“I’m optimistic that we’ll be able to complete this agreement soon,” Clinton told the New Times of Russia [in an interview](#) March 15 in Washington.

“It’s a technically very complex treaty to accomplish. We share an interest in making real reductions in our strategic arsenals, and that is the most important point,” Clinton said. “To do that in a way that is verifiable, but which is less costly and less operationally complex than the previous START agreement, is the key challenge, and we are working through it together.”

Negotiators from the United States and Russia have been working since early in 2009 to draw up a new treaty. The 1991 treaty expired in December 2009. President Obama said those negotiations are ongoing, and a successor treaty is expected soon.

Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev held a telephone conversation March 13 on the START talks and reviewed the progress in the negotiations, the White House said recently. “Both leaders are committed to concluding an agreement soon,” said Mike Hammer, a spokesman for the president’s National Security Council.

The United States and Russia have agreed to maintain the critical 1991 agreement past its expiration date until a new agreement is reached, saying that strategic stability is important. When Obama and Medvedev held their first face-to-face meeting in April 2009, [the two leaders pledged](#) to work for a world free of nuclear arms, and said every effort would be made to reduce their nuclear arsenals with the long-term goal of reducing global nuclear tensions.

At the Moscow Summit in July last year, Obama and Medvedev [agreed](#) to reduce the number of nuclear warheads each possesses to a range of 1,500 to 1,675 over seven years. The treaty would also limit the means of delivery, which include nuclear-powered submarines, long-range bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles. The ballistic missiles can also be used to deliver non-nuclear warheads over the same distances, and that has been one of several highly technical areas of discussion.

[4. Northern Ireland Offers Perspective for Mideast Peace Efforts \(03-16-2010\)](#)

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the United States is seeking the “full commitment” of Israelis and Palestinians to peace efforts, and visiting Irish Foreign Minister Michael Martin said the developing peace process in Northern Ireland offers the two sides a “useful template” for conflict resolution.

In remarks at the State Department March 16, Clinton praised the March 9 vote by the Northern Ireland Assembly to complete the process — know as devolution — of transferring police and judicial powers from the British Parliament.

The vote marked “an important step toward realizing the promise of the Good Friday Agreement and the St. Andrews Agreement and achieving a full and lasting peace for the people of Northern Ireland,” Clinton said. The Obama administration, through its economic envoy, Declan Kelly, has been actively working with Northern Irish leaders to build on their agreements and promote peace through [private-sector investment](#).

Martin said reconciliation between the communities in Northern Ireland remains a “key priority,” and there is still work needed to extend the economic benefits brought by the peace process to

harder-to-reach communities in the area. "I'm talking about areas where the health indices are not what they should be, where school-completion rates may not be what they should be," he said.

But, in reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Martin said one important lesson from Northern Ireland's experience is that "where there is a political will on behalf of all parties to a conflict or to a dispute, there can be resolution, and the prospects ... for resolution can be good."

It has taken more than 20 years for the Northern Ireland process to arrive where it is today, and "it still needs a lot of attention, focus and application," he said.

But the experience provides "a useful template to look at in terms of how you bring people into a process that ultimately leads to a resolution," Martin said, stressing the need for moderate voices to be encouraged.

The foreign minister welcomed the U.S. push for indirect, or proximity, talks between Israelis and Palestinians and cited Special Envoy George Mitchell's "valuable role" in encouraging the peace process in Northern Ireland during the 1990s. "We know his patience, his legendary patience, and his patience in situations like this," he said. Mitchell was appointed special envoy for Mideast peace in January 2009.

Secretary Clinton said that in the aftermath of Israel's announcement of [new settlements](#) in East Jerusalem, the United States is actively consulting with Israel "over steps that we think would demonstrate the requisite commitment" to the peace process.

The Obama administration is committed to a negotiated two-state solution, Clinton said. "We think that George Mitchell's legendary patience will win the day as the process gets started again because there's just too much at stake for both the Palestinians and the Israelis," the secretary added.

Asked about the role of Hamas, which the United States has designated as a terrorist organization, Clinton said the group is aware of the conditions it needs to meet in order to participate in peace efforts.

"If Hamas renounces violence, recognizes Israel's right to exist, pursues a responsible political path, they would certainly be recognized as having a role to play. But in the absence of that, you cannot have an armed resistance group that continues to call for the elimination of Israel as part of a peace process," she said. "It's a contradiction."

Foreign Minister Martin likened the situation to the participation of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), in the Northern Ireland peace process.

"The fundamental trigger for the engagement back a long time ago was the renunciation of violence, a cease-fire that the IRA declared to facilitate engagement and participation in the overall process," Martin said.

In Ireland's approach to the Middle East, "we've consistently made it clear publicly that there has to be a renunciation of violence, and there has to be a recognition ... of Israel," he said.

Secretary Clinton also welcomed Ireland's decision to devote 20 percent of its international assistance budget to help alleviate global hunger. Ireland is already targeting maternal and infant malnutrition in countries such as Malawi, Ethiopia and Tanzania, she said.

“This is a priority for both of our governments, but it’s a historical passion and cause for Ireland,” Clinton said, citing the 19th-century famine that reduced Ireland’s population by nearly 25 percent, as the result of death and migration.

5. State’s Tauscher Discussion on START, Arms Control (03-16-2010)

Tauscher answers questions in online dialogue, “Ask the Under Secretary”

U.S. Department of State, Ellen Tauscher, Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, Washington, DC, March 4, 2010

Why is a START Follow on Treaty so important?

The nuclear arms race that characterized the Cold War cast a shadow over the lives of people everywhere—especially those living in Europe and the United States. But today there is universal agreement that, as Secretary Clinton said recently, "People everywhere have the right to live free from the fear of nuclear destruction."

So to that end, President Obama and President Medvedev of Russia have agreed to complete a verifiable treaty to reduce the size of our nuclear arsenals. Both sides have been negotiating for nearly a year. But we’re at the end game and we can see the finish line.

I thought Russia was a partner and the Cold War ended, why do we need a treaty?

The United States and Russia still have more than 95 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons. We need a treaty that limits the number of nuclear weapons and allows us to continue to monitor the other's intentions and capabilities.

You know we have relied on the START treaty for 15 years to make sure that promises made were promises kept. And we certainly agree with that Russian maxim that President Reagan made famous ... Trust but Verify.

But START expired late last year. And we need a new agreement, updated for the 21st century, to help maintain and improve our current relationship.

I've seen a lot written in the news about missile defense. What’s the real story?

You know that subject has prompted a lot of debate in both of our countries. We are implementing President Obama’s refocused missile defense plan, which is known as the Phased Adaptive Approach, to defend our troops in Europe and ALL of our European allies.

Our missile defense architecture in Europe is in no way aimed at Russia. It is meant to defend against the emerging ballistic missile threat from Iran.

We hope to cooperate on missile defense with Russia to address a range of threats from around the world. Russia and the United States have unique missile defense assets. If used together in a cooperative manner, we believe it could enhance the security of both of our countries.

Aren’t nuclear weapons a key part of our defense strategy?

Sure. The biggest threat we face today is from terrorists who want a nuclear bomb. Clinging to nuclear weapons ultimately makes us less safe and makes the world a more unstable place. But don’t get me wrong. We know that just because we reduce the size of our deterrent, states like Iran and North Korea won’t necessarily follow our lead. But we will have greater credibility and leverage to persuade others not to pursue a nuclear capability.

6. Israeli Settlement Announcement "An Insult," Clinton Says (03-15-2010)

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Obama administration officials continue to criticize Israeli settlement expansion following the March 9 announcement of 1,600 new units in East Jerusalem, saying bilateral ties remain strong but that Israel and the Palestinians need to take measures to build up confidence and trust that will help advance peace efforts.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, in a March 12 interview with NBC television, described the Israeli announcement, made during [Vice President Biden's trip to the region](#), as "an insult" both to the vice president and to the United States.

"We share common values and there is so much that Israel represents that we support," Clinton said. "But we believe in the two-state solution" that establishes a viable, contiguous and independent Palestinian state and that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has also said he believes in. The Obama administration wants to see "confidence-building measures and actions that will result in the resumption of negotiations and then a move toward the resolution on the final status issues," she said.

"The United States is deeply invested in trying to work with the parties in order to bring about this resolution," she said. "We don't get easily discouraged, so ... we're working toward the resumption of the negotiation. But we expect Israel and the Palestinians to do their part, and not to take any action that will undermine the chance that we can achieve the two state solution," she said.

The secretary acknowledged on CNN television March 12 that there are those on both sides as well as "outside agitators" who are not in favor of a two-state solution or a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Both sides had agreed to hold indirect talks on March 8. Clinton said the resumption of talks "is the most important goal," and that the Obama administration wants "the difficult negotiations that will lead to the two-state solution" to proceed.

In a [joint statement March 12](#), the United Nations, the European Union, the Russian Federation and the United States, collectively known as the Middle East Quartet, also condemned Israel's announcement of new settlements and agreed to "closely monitor developments in Jerusalem" and consider additional steps to address the situation on the ground.

"The Quartet will take full stock of the situation at its meeting in Moscow on March 19," the statement said.

All four reaffirmed that "unilateral actions taken by either party cannot prejudice the outcome of negotiations and will not be recognized by the international community," and that peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors, including the establishment of a Palestinian state "is in the fundamental interests of the parties, of all states in the region, and of the international community."

Senior White House adviser David Axelrod told ABC television March 14 that the Israeli announcement "seemed calculated to undermine" the recently announced proximity talks, which he said was "distressing" to those who are promoting peace in the region.

The conflict serves as a flash point throughout the region, and it is important not only to the security of Israelis and Palestinians, but also the United States “that we move forward and resolve this very difficult issue,” Axelrod said.

7. Israel's Settlement Plan Counter to Spirit of Biden Visit (03-12-2010)

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — The March 8 beginning of Vice President Biden's visit to Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan coincided with special Middle East envoy George Mitchell's announcement that Israelis and Palestinians had agreed to resume indirect talks, but Biden's visit to encourage both sides in their peace efforts was complicated by the Israeli government's announcement March 9 of new housing projects in East Jerusalem.

Biden, who describes himself as “a strong supporter of Israel,” told an Israeli audience in Tel Aviv March 11 that the United States continues to stand with Israel against common security threats and that the Obama administration understands the “critical, strategic relationship” between the two countries. But “sometimes only a friend can deliver the hardest truth,” he continued, and he condemned the new settlement activity.

That decision, he said, “undermined the trust required for productive negotiations.” The Obama administration has said it wants the agreed-upon indirect contacts or “proximity talks” to develop into face-to-face negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians so they can peacefully resolve their long conflict.

“The United States will continue to hold both sides accountable for any statements or any actions that inflame tensions or prejudice the outcome of these talks,” Biden said. “The most important thing is for these talks to go forward ... in good faith. We can't delay, because when progress is postponed, extremists exploit our differences and they sow hate.”

He warned the Israelis that without the establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian state, their country's identity as a democratic Jewish state will be jeopardized and the country will be unable to achieve lasting security.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton followed Biden's comments with a March 12 call to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in which she repeated the Obama administration's “strong objections” to the proposed new settlements, “not just in terms of timing, but also in its substance,” and that Israel's actions had undermined trust and confidence in both “the peace process and in America's interests.”

According to Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs P.J. Crowley, Clinton told Netanyahu that the Israeli announcement is “a deeply negative signal about Israel's approach to the bilateral relationship and counter to the spirit of the vice president's trip.”

“The secretary said she could not understand how this happened, particularly in light of the United States' strong commitment to Israel's security, and she made clear that the Israeli government needed to demonstrate not just through words but through specific actions that they are committed to this relationship and to the peace process,” Crowley said.

Both Mitchell and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman have been reaching out to Palestinian and Arab leaders since March 11, Crowley said, and Mitchell is expected to return to the region the week of March 14.

The United States and its partners in the region “jointly remain committed” to the indirect talks that had been agreed to March 8, Crowley said, while also “acknowledging that obviously it is a difficult environment, given the Israeli statement.”

8. [Pakistan, Afghanistan Struggle to Protect Human Rights, U.S. Says \(03-12-2010\)](#) Report sees limited human-rights advances during period of violence, abuses

By Howard Cincotta
Special Correspondent

Washington — In two of the most complex political and security environments in the world, characterized by brutal insurgencies, Pakistan and Afghanistan achieved only modest advances in protecting citizens from violence and human rights abuses in 2009, according to the [Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#), issued March 11 by the U.S. Department of State.

The United States has issued annual human rights reports on countries worldwide for the past 34 years as mandated by the U.S. Congress, [providing the most comprehensive record available of the condition of human rights around the world](#), Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said upon releasing the reports.

Although both Pakistan and Afghanistan undertook positive initiatives during the year, including national political developments that strengthened democratic institutions, both country reports found that their overall human rights record remained poor.

The [2009 Pakistan report](#) found an overall “culture of impunity” in the law enforcement and security services characterized by extrajudicial killings and disappearances, pervasive corruption, abuse of suspects and prisoners, arbitrary arrest and harsh prison conditions, and lack of judicial independence. Afghanistan experienced many of these same problems, [its country report said](#), and its security situation “deteriorated significantly during the year.”

Government and political officials in both countries were the targets of sustained militant attacks and threats, including targeted assassinations and suicide bombings.

In both countries, violence and discrimination against women remained pervasive, as did restrictions on freedom of religion, especially for minority faiths. Human trafficking and child abuse continued to be major issues as well, the reports said.

INSURGENCIES

Taliban and militant attacks brought death, displacement and fear to thousands in Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to Afghan officials cited in the report, 2009 was the country’s deadliest year since 2001, when U.S. and international forces first launched military operations in Afghanistan to combat the Taliban and al-Qaida. In 2009, Afghanistan suffered an estimated 2,400 civilian casualties and more than 3,000 killings of police and government officials, an increase of 14 percent, the report said.

Estimates are that the Taliban was responsible for 67 percent of all civilian deaths, according to the country report. The government reported that airstrikes by NATO's International Security Assistance Force, which includes U.S. forces, caused 359 civilian deaths, down 28 percent from 2008.

Taliban insurgents targeted hundreds of schools with arson and explosives, especially those providing education for girls, the report said.

In Pakistan, government forces conducted military operations against Taliban and other militant groups occupying parts of the North-West Frontier Province, including the Swat Valley region, and parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The conflict resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and the displacement of approximately 3 million people, although approximately 1.7 million had returned home by year's end, the report noted.

A low-level insurgency continued in Pakistan's province of Baluchistan, resulting in the death of hundreds of militants and more than 90 members of the security forces. Significant numbers of civilians disappeared or were killed, according to nongovernmental organizations and media reports cited in the human rights report.

Taliban insurgents launched multiple suicide bombings with heavy casualties throughout the year, including attacks on a crowded Shia mosque near Islamabad, [a hotel and market in Peshawar](#), and [the headquarters of the Pakistani Army in Rawalpindi](#).

Suicide and truck bombs killed 185 in Kandahar, Afghanistan; Kabul was subjected to repeated bombings and attacks as well.

POLITICS, PRESS FREEDOMS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Both countries experienced democratic change in 2009, the reports said. In Pakistan, under pressure from the "Lawyers Movement" and the major opposition party, Muslim League-Nawaz, the government reinstated Iftikhar Chaudhry as chief justice of the Supreme Court along with 10 other justices. The Supreme Court later invalidated an ordinance that had protected high officials from corruption charges.

In August, an estimated 5 million Afghan voters cast ballots in presidential and provincial council elections despite Taliban threats, participating in the first competitive presidential election in the country's history. President Hamid Karzai was declared the winner in November after his main challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, decided not to participate in a runoff election, which was scheduled after a lengthy review of fraud and irregularity complaints determined Karzai did not win an outright majority in the initial balloting.

Pakistan has a vigorous tradition of free speech and press, although the government controls large sectors of print and electronic media, the report says. Journalists must also confront threats, beatings and intimidation by militants and criminal elements, often leading to self-censorship. Media restrictions imposed by former president Pervez Musharraf have not been enforced, and although authorities have attempted to control some extremist Web sites, Internet access remained generally free and open in both countries.

In Afghanistan, the media environment was grimmer. "Journalists increasingly were vulnerable to physical harm and instances of pressure from multiple sources to influence reporting, including

national and provincial governments, warlords, the drug mafia, foreign governments, and Taliban insurgents,” the country report stated.

Although under constant threat of violence, local and international organizations generally operated free of government constraints in both countries.

CORRUPTION REMAINS AN ISSUE

Both governments have struggled to address corruption, the reports said. Afghanistan established an Anti-Corruption Unit and trained and deployed 100 officers as inspector generals. Electronic deposit of salaries for police and military has cut opportunities for graft, the report noted. However, the report said “corruption was endemic throughout society” in Afghanistan, where employees must pay bribes to get, keep or be promoted in jobs, and where “a lack of political accountability and low salaries exacerbated government corruption.”

In Pakistan, 21 “accountability courts” are empowered to consider corruption cases; both the Punjab provincial government and the Karachi city government have undertaken technical and human rights training programs. However, the report said, “officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity.”

The constitutions of both countries declare Islam to be the state religion, and state that other faiths can worship freely. In practice, however, minority religions are often subjected to harassment, legal actions and severe societal pressures, the reports said.

In Afghanistan, “societal pressures” meant Christians cannot practice their faith openly, the report said. Hindus and Sikhs also face systemic discrimination. According to Islamic law, conversion from Islam is regarded as apostasy and punishable by death.

Pakistan experienced increased violence against religious minorities, according to the report, with sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia extremist groups. There were also attacks on Ahmadi communities, which the law declares a non-Muslim minority, and on Christian communities. Blasphemy laws have been used in both business and personal disputes.

Violence against women, including rape, domestic assaults and “honor” killings, continued to plague both countries, the report said. In Pakistan, the Aurat Foundation reported that cases of violence against women increased 13 percent over the previous year, with 1,384 women killed, 1,987 abducted, 928 raped or gang-raped, and 683 who committed suicide.

In Afghanistan, Karzai signed the Elimination of Violence Against Women law that criminalizes violence against women, including rape, beating and forced marriage. Protests emerged over a civil law only applicable to the Shia population that was seen as ignoring gender equality. The report concludes, “Women continued to face pervasive human rights violations and remained largely uninformed about their rights under the law. Discrimination was particularly acute in rural areas and villages.”

In releasing the 2009 human rights reports, Clinton said, “Human rights are universal, but their experience is local. That is why we are committed to holding everyone to the same standard, including ourselves.”
